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ABSTRACT

Stephen Duncombe has written one of the only book-length studies examining the phenomenon of "zines." "Note from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture" traces the historical rise in zine popularity beginning with fanzines of the 1930s, fueled in the 1970s by the punk movement, and reaching a height in the 1990s. In his estimation there are 10,000 zines currently in print and over 750,000 readers. The interest in this paper is in those produced by girls and young women, ages 13-21. According to the paper, as defined by Duncombe, zines are "noncommercial, nonprofessional, small circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves." What makes a zine a zine and not a hobby, according to Duncombe, is the politics practiced by the writer. "Zinesters" set themselves in opposition to mainstream culture in terms of both form and content, and they usually write for a like-minded audience. The paper states that Duncombe writes about "selling out" the underground culture of zines to the world of academia and its current fascination with cultural studies. It finds that the tool that zinesters use most readily in writing against mainstream culture is the personal--they believe that what makes their writing significant is their own experience, and that experience is rooted in both the ordinary and the extraordinary. The paper profiles several zines. (NKA)

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Adolescent Girls' Zines: Uncommon Pages and Practices[1]

The cover of Valerie's zine, *Farm Sweater Revolution* #5, displays a narrow picture of a hand, presumably a woman's given the bracelets and the curve of the forearm, either chaining or unchaining what appears to be an apartment door. We, as reader, see little of the hand and even less of the figure. We are not being invited in. The hand is caught midair, halted in action, having just securely chained the door against intruder or perhaps moving to unchain it, to let someone in--a reader, a rapist, the UPS woman. We aren't made to know. The image itself is narrow, like a door, echoing the proportions of Valerie's zine. What you feel, what I feel, when I meet with Valerie's work is fear. That tiny chain cannot protect all that it must: the owner of the hand, the words on the page, the safety of home. Only when I turn to imagining what waits behind the door—what is being kept out or kept safe by that chain---do I realize that Valerie has already let me in. I, along with her others readers, are inside the room. We watch the hand perpetually reaching for the chain. Don't open the door, I think, wait, look through the peephole. Then it dawns on me that maybe I am about to be asked to leave.

Because I am a fraud. Writing about adolescent zines like Valerie's, asking girls across the country, strangers, to send me their writing, their self-published souls. Not only have I never written a zine, the politics they practice—leftist, feminist, gay-positive—are beliefs I came to as an adult. My adolescence was far less informed, far less empowered, and far more marked by passive conformity. I poach. I ramble the pages, read their anger, consume their passion and

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their complexity. They awe me, but they are not me. I am not the reader Valerie has in mind when she writes, "I am twenty-one and I am afraid. People in my life keep hurting me in various ways. I tell them that it's okay, it's okay, I understand. But inside I picture a thick wooden door being pulled across my heart."

Valerie has sent me her zine because I have—on university letter head no less—requested a copy. She has trusted me as a reader—has put her trust in me. What, now, should I do? Open the door to you as well? How will we know if we become another in a series of those who have hurt, those who have been barred, those who have failed to protect?

Stephen Duncombe has written one of the only book-length studies examining the phenomenon of zines. *Note from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* traces the historical rise in zine popularity beginning with fanzines of the 1930s, fueled in the 1970s by the punk movement, and reaching a height in 1990s. In his estimation, there are 10,000 zines currently in print and over 750,000 readers (14). While many groups write zines, I am interested in those produced by girls and young woman, ages 13-21. Figures for the readership of these zines—like the very writers themselves—have not proved significant enough to count. Their numbers are unknown.

Defined by Duncombe, zines are "noncommercial, nonprofessional, small circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves" (6). What makes a zine a zine and not a hobby, he goes on to say, is the politics practiced by the writer. Zinesters set themselves in opposition to mainstream culture in terms of both form and content. Duncombe suggests that the identity performed by the writer is a "negative one," manufactured in negation of mainstream, straight society (40). Throughout his study, he uses words like "spasmodic,"

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[1] Presentation included overheads of zines.

"dissonant," "unsettling" to describe both the language and the images contained in zines. Like the punk movement from which zine writing grew, "the ideal is to replicate visually the energy and spontaneity of a punk show" (99). Zinesters perform through word and image the pain and the joy of being outside, of being different. Because the story they tell is an outsiders story, it, like so many of the stories told by those rendered invisible, must be told in ways that break expectations and disrupt assumptions.

While zinesters write in opposition to the dominant culture—often coopting and reclaiming images found in consumerist society--they write for a like-minded audience. The community—though national—is intimate, the readership known. We see this in the way zinesters often write to the reader directly, to "you." Menghsin opens her zine "Sidetracked" by writing that her zine is "the one way I can connect to *you*, if you would have it." Zinesters can assume an intimacy with their readers because they control the distribution of their zines. Coffee shops and alternative bookstores may "distro" select zines, but for the most part you must be inside the community to have access to their writing. Zinesters devote final pages of their zines to reviews of other zines, providing names and addresses. Menghsin writes, "I have this anal retentive *need* to know just *who* gets my zine." The ability to control audience is particularly important for girls who experience physical, psychological, and emotional abuse at the hands of their peers, as well as teachers and parents. Prying eyes are everywhere. Menghsin must use the computer in the study where she writes with her back to the door, "allowing anyone to sneak in on me and read over my shoulder, something poppa likes to do occasionally." The bravery with which they write themselves out in their zines must be safeguarded. In addition, as Duncombe points out, zinesters critique passive, consumerist society and, for political reasons, want to control the production and the consumption of their texts. A copy machine, recycled paper as

makeshift envelopes, and a list of recommended zines found in a favorite zine are the tools that allow zinesters to control who gets through the door.

And yet here I am sharing with you, what is meant for others. Here I am including their texts in an academic, institutional setting. They are writing to a readership, quite possibly, the opposite of the one gathered in this room. In these pages, education is suspect. In "Death of Psyche," Liz writes that she doesn't "rely on high school for [her] primary source of education." Teachers are suspect. She adds that she doesn't think "they tell us those truth" and that they "expect us to believe everything at face value." Parents are suspect. Menghsin writes that her father, upon learning that she received a D in calculus and having already forbid her to write her zines, "has said...that if he catches me writing anymore letters, he will rip them up. She goes on to say, "i guess this limitation extends to this zine. i have no intention of complying though, since there's no way he can stop me, short of cutting off my hands." Adults, in general, only damage. Given zinesters explicit anti-institutional stand, it is difficult for me to justify my work.

Duncombe writes about "selling out" the underground culture of zines to the world of academia and its current fascination with cultural studies. He gives four justifications for his own actions. First, the "alternative culture has already been discovered," in fact, he points out, the very forces zinesters are working against, the media in particular, now regularly employ "alternative culture" to sell their products to the cloying masses. (I was made all too aware of his point recently when I had my young adult literature class read contemporary teen zines. In the pages of YM and Sassy, pages filled with admittedly more diversity than I had expected but wafer-thin, boy crazy images of girls nonetheless, the rhetoric of zines is everywhere. There was a section entitled DIY, creative spelling abounded, and slick copy replicated the cut-and-paste look of zine pages). Second, he knows this world, has been a part of it, and therefore can do the

best job representing these writers. Third, he is a "conscientious observer and careful listener," an observation borne out by the care with which he writes about zinesters. And finally, what zinesters have to say, he feels, is too important to "stay sequestered within the walls of a subculture ghetto." (16).

In looking at his list, I try to register my own reasons for reading this world. My response is less sure than Duncombe's. While I practice self-reflexivity as a researcher, and certainly believe that these stories matter, I am less certain that it is my place to expose, to reveal those who, like Valerie, write they have been revealed much too much already, whose experiences with the world have literally generated a fear of going outside. To what end can I justify the unchaining of the door.

The goal is less unclear for the zinesters themselves. They write toward nothing less than social transformation. Liz begins issue six of *Death of Psyche* by writing, "I make such a terrific statistic. I'm a teenager, bisexual, feminist, come from a divorced family, have two stepfamilies, have attempted suicide, and have an eating disorder." She goes on to suggest that she, unlike others that she knows, would not "give back" her sexuality if she could. Rather, she "love[s] the liberation of having the potential to fall in love with any single member of the human race." Her zine is devoted to issues of feminist politics and heterosexism, and she fantasizes relationships with both men and women, often on the same page. She concludes her zine with what appears initially to be an apology to her readers for her intense focus on sexuality;

> I realize I've written quite a bit about a few subjects in this letter. In anticipation of letters asking me why I make such a big deal of things, let me tell you know [sic]. I write about these things because they're important to me, and because the facts say they're important to others, too. Gay teens are 3 times as likely as straight teens to attempt suicide. Over half the youth living on the streets are gay. Gay people are still not allowed to marry.....So, as long as there is progress to be made, I'm not

> going to apologize for writing anything in this zine. I only hope you can take what you need from here and move on.

She is sure of the work that she needs to undertake. Her writing matters; her stories mean. Unlike me, who treads as carefully as possible but still worry about the results, Liz and other zinesters write their pages with a confidence they rarely experience in their bodies. They work to connect, and, as Menghsin writes, to entertain, inspire, motive, agitate their readers into action.

Zinesters are highly aware of the rhetorical choices they are making. As practicing feminists, they recognize the ways in which their bodies are read as text every day. They are adept at reading, misreading, and re-reading. In critiquing the limitations that patriarchy and heterosexism place on both bodies and texts, these writers work to multiply possibility and complicate identity. Nothing is still. Nothing is static. Not the images, not the impressions, not the ideas, not the readers. Zinesters dwell—even revel in--fluidity. One zinester ends her latest issue by quoting Whitman in saying she "contain multitudes." They enjoy the porous nature of identity, boundaries, and genres. What is perhaps most sophisticated about their work is their ability to seek this fluidity at the same time they claim that they are what they have written. Mengshin says of her zine writing, "*how important* this is to me. 28cents worth of paper but priceless chunks of *me*." Their work is both playful and political. And always intensely personal.

The tool that zinesters use most readily in writing against mainstream culture is the personal. They believe that what makes their writing significant is their own experience—and that experience is rooted in both the ordinary and the extraordinary. Menghsin writes, "So what if most DIY publications are decidedly unprofessional in comparison to the glossy full-color teen mags anyone can pick up at their sreetcorner gas station? After a full year of doing this, relating

my own stories and sharing my experiences with other zinesters, how obvious that what is most true to life is not what is bought in a mainstream publication for 4 or 5 bucks, but what can be obtained for a fifth of that cost, or even free, direct from the author (s)." The stories zinesters relate, their way of seeing the world, as well as their unique and creative representation of that vision testify to a truth that disrupts the flat, cold, identical and damaging images teen mags perpetuate. They are aware of the cultural scripts they must fight against.

For the most part, the experiences zinsters relate are experiences from the everyday. An exchange at the grocery store that depicts female objectification, a diary of the days at work, a moment in the hallways at school, music and books that define who they are. In an issue of "Sidetracked" Mengshin records a typical day at school. We see her struggle through calculus when the teacher—normally a "fun person" becomes a "teacher"—a figure to shut out. She documents the bus rides, the meaningless writing assignments, the book she is reading. Even in these moments, she is critiquing an educational climate that encourages conformity and parents who demand perfection. As feminists, they see the political in every moment and understand that these moments are not meaningless but rather spaces for action and resistance.

Just as readily, though, zinesters relate experiences that are far from the ordinary. Date rape, eating disorders, gay bashing. In the same issue that opens with a typical day at school, Menghsin ends by revealing the physical abuse in her family, that her mother hits her, that her father hits her mother, that, and this is what she cannot believe, her mother beats herself even more than she beats her daughter. Similar to ordinary moments, this extraordinary moment names the boundaries that too often remain invisible. In an attempt to connect with other like-minded teens, her essay on abuse names a reality that society says should remain hidden. Even as she refuses to keep the secret, Menghsin names her fears in telling by titling her essay "I'm

Afraid I Shouldn't Be Telling You This." Zinesters refuse to swallow the messages society is giving them: to be thin, silent, dumb, and identical. They speak back through their writing.

However, their writing is not one-dimensionally triumphant. These are writers who are trying to resist a society that would have them remain silent. They are young. While they are strong, they are not invincible. Painful revelations remind us of how tiring, how almost impossible it is in our world to be a strong woman. And they reflect constantly on the texts in their lives. When Liz learns about the Salem Witch Trials in school, she explores the ways in which women continue to be hunted today—hunted by unrealistic standards beauty. Intellectually she sees the ways in which women have been oppressed throughout history. She references *The Beauty Myth*, a book she is reading to describe how beauty rather than intelligence is used against women in contemporary society. And she critiques that prison. At the same time, she ends her brief essay with the troubling line: As I slide two fingers down my throat and think that I'm doing it for the next person to touch me, I think I need to finish that damn book." Regardless of whether the "I" here is really the author or simply a narrator, the impact is the same. Even knowledge and political awareness are flimsy weapons against the onslaught of a culture bent on thinness.

Unable to control the conversation about bodies and women and sexuality in either daily life or in popular media, zinesters are able to control the conversation on the page. Sometimes quite literally. In "Death of a Psyche," Liz relies subverts traditional features of magazines—interviews and quizzes—to name her politics, and she does so by conducting an interview with herself. Some of the questions she poses to herself include "Were you taught by the adults around you to look down on anybody because of something that was different from you?" In even posing this question, Liz reveals to her readers that those around her act from prejudice and

suspicion. In her answer, she recognizes that these beliefs come from somewhere, that children learn behaviors from their parents, that they watch. She goes on to ask herself "who do you see as powerful? are they white? male? christian? upper-class? politicians?" Her question again allows her to name a truth, but her answer complicates her very assumption. She writes, that although those who are in power share the qualities names, "the people I see as powerful are those who challenge or break or bend the power of those in charge." At a slant, she names her own work as empowering and calls into question the very definition of power. The conversation is controlled completely. She determines both the questions asked and the answers given. No one else enters. What remains unsaid is the desire for this kind of control in her "real" life.

Later in the issue, Liz again coopts a staple of published magazines when she creates an "Application for a Date with a Zinestress." Here, too, she is able control both the questions as the responses, though her desired effect is entertainment as much as political statement. For example, she allows "everyone" as the only response to who should be allowed to be equal. Sexual orientation options include gay, bi, straight, no labels for me, thanks, and depends on the day. In response to what you feel when you see Richard Simmons sweating to the oldies you may choose, horror, horror, horror, or horror. The questionnaire obviously reads against the questionnaires found in beauty magazines: those that reduce women to bodies or dates for boys. Here, Liz uses her questionnaire for both playful and political ends. While we are made aware of the limits placed on females, at the same time we are reminded that these writers—while incredibly mature in their thinking and reading and writing—are young women. They play in these pages as well.

Here is another example of a playful moment. This one found in Valerie's zine. She has written a poem naming the dos and don'ts for a potential partner. It is important to notice that

the gender of her partner is not named and therefore up for grabs. Gender is less important than these other qualities, including the fact that a potential partner should not expect Valerie to acknowledge their cat. On the opposite page Valerie has placed a pictures—the picture that theoretically depicts wooing. It is a child petting a horse. What such an image represents is left open. She gives us no easy answers but she is clearly having fun.

While their tone can be both playful as well as political, the issues zinesters address are ultimately far from whimsy. Witty moments dot the pages of their zines, but at no time is the reader allowed to stray too far from the purpose—social transformation through the naming of personal experience. I began my paper with the initial image from Valerie's zine: the hand locking or unlocking the door. And we have just seen an example of Valerie having fun with her zine. Yet, the final image of her zine is far from entertaining. It is even more vulnerable than the initial one—a woman whose naked back rests open. The image could possibly be read as erotic, but within the context of the zine in which Valerie talks about the abuse she has suffered from opening the door, the open back more likely suggests a beating. It is disturbing. And we are meant to be disturbed. Nothing is certain in these pages. Nothing is known. Nothing that is except the continued proliferation of damaging images of women and their bodies and the energy required to write against such efforts.

Works Cited

Duncombe, Stephen. *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture.* London: Verso Books, 1997.